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Diasporic experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth

Abstract: Lahiri talks about the problems of second generation diaspora in Unaccustomed Earth after their assimilation in the host culture. Very succinctly and elaborately she has discussed the dilemmas, conflicts and confusions which have cropped up in the minds of these young people about their adjustments, adaptations and assimilations in the new country. The first part consists of different experiences of diasporic Indians on a foreign land and the second part titled "Hema and Kaushik" is three interconnected stories of two young generation diasporic Indians who converge at a points of time and develop a kind of love and understanding with each other but have to depart with each other tragically in the end.

Key words: adjustments, assimilation, diasporic, love, understanding.

Introduction:

The word 'diaspora' has been taken from the Greek meaning "to disperse". It is used to describe the dispersion of a people from their original homeland. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define 'diaspora' as "the Voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their home lands into new regions....". Robert Cohen describes diaspora as "the communities of people living together in one country who " acknowledge that the old country –a nation often buried in language, religion custom or folklore - always has some claim on loyalty and emotions.

Indians living in foreign lands, then are neither forced out of their country, like Jews, nor did they experience exile in the foreign lands. Quite simply they are a transnational community or acculturated ethnic minority.

Expatriates, especially first generation expatriates, find it hard to mentally adjust to the alien culture, to the new set up. They try to survive in their adopted land by creating alternative worlds in two ways ; one in the form of nostalgia of the past and two, avoiding in all possible ways the process of socialization by clinging to their own culture.

"Unaccustomed Earth" has brought Jhumpa Lahiri once again to limelight as a superb diasporic writer delving deeply into immigrant experience in the backdrop of her own experiences. Lahiri notes the various facets of human interactions among the second generation in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Indian Americans absorbed into the western milieu. They experience deep sense of exile, isolation and alienation.

Lahiri deals with a multicultural society, both from 'inside' and 'outside' seeking to find her native identity as well as new identity in the adopted country. This brings in a clash of cultures and dislocation and displacement. This is the fate of people in diaspora which Lahiri attempts to prove through her stories. In *Unaccustomed Earth* she takes up a broader perspective and exhorts diasporic people to make an effort to locate themselves in an alien land.

and the results will certainly be favourable. The metaphoric title of the collection is derived from the epigraph from Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" which reads: "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and so far as their fortunes may be within my control shall strike their roots into Unaccustomed earth."

Lahiri seems to suggest that human nature may atrophy if people continue to toil in the same worn out soil there is a need for a change in the perspective of diasporic community towards host culture.

Lahiri portrays Ruma's struggle to accommodate Indian customs with the American life in the title story Unaccustomed earth. A widower father visits his daughter Ruma, who has recently moved to Seattle with her husband Adam and her son Akash. This story is in double perspective. The father views the whole situation from his viewpoint while daughter has a different attitude and outlook for their relationship, her upbringing in a different country in a new social and cultural setup, her education, her marriage to an American all influences the formation of her identity and role. The diasporic experience of Ruma and her father is multiple as the sense of exile, alienation, uprootedness continue to overwhelm them. The traditional familial relationship in Ruma's Bengali – household is getting diluted with her mother's death, brother Roma's absence and her father's solitary life.

Ruma's father's visit to her place after her mother's death puts her in a dilemma whether, she should ask her father to stay with them as a responsible daughter, or she does not ask him to stay with her that would make her feel guilty. She finds herself in a discrepant position where there is a confrontation between the native culture and host country culture. If she locates herself in an American culture, then it is individual freedom, which is uppermost but if she follows Indian culture, then her conscience does not allow her to do so. The father and daughter

never has a deep bonding and there is always a difference of opinion between them. Though she is very close to her mother she also has a different opinion with her mother about her marriage with an American man. Her mothers comment about her marriage affected her very much when she says, “You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian that is the bottom line” (26)

Ruma reconnects with her father by asking him to be friendlier with her family. Though decision to ask her father to stay with her is in her own selfish interests, as in her father’s company she finds her son Akash more cultured, civilized, calmer and cooler. He has developed a liking for Bengali food and language. She wants to teach her siblings the social and cultural values of both the countries. This exposes Ruma’s inherent desire and willingness of diaspora to accept the ethos of interculturalism.

“Hell-Heaven” deals with an emotional interaction between an Bengali man with an Indian immigrant, Jhumpa Lahiri looks at the psyche of a married woman in an alien land through Aparna who falls in love with Pranab Kaku, a Bengali man much younger to her. The story is narrated by Usha, daughter of second generation Indian immigrants settled in America who looks back on her Boston childhood, conjures up the sociocultural alienation that burdened her mother, who wears “the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women”(61) Hazra says that Hell Heaven is about “an immigrant man befriending a married immigrant women and her husband and entering the closed precious world of an immigrant couple to upset its equanimity”.

Pranab a fellow Bengali from Calcutta who belongs to the wealthy family, allowed him to move to America for the study of Engineering at MIT. Pranab happened to meet Usha and her mother at Harvard coop along Massachusetts Avenue. His moves are very well planned. Tapping the woman on her shoulder and excusing himself to be a new comer to America, he tries his luck in building familiarity. Mean while, his life in America becomes lonely with no

proper housing and he has to be satisfied with his living in the attic of a house. "Life as a graduate student in Boston was a cruel shock and in his first month he lost nearly twenty pounds... He rented a room in the attic and was permitted to use the kitchen only at specified times of the day and instructed always to wipe down the stove with winded and sponge. My parents agreed that it was a terrible situation (62)

In such dire circumstances, Usha's parents take pity on him and let him frequent their father. Her mother took a liking for the young man and he took the liberty to be very familiar with her. Usha's parents admired his brilliance and playful ways. His coming to their apartment gave a new lease of life to her mother who has to live a solitary life most of the day.

The reason being that both of them shared common interest and hobbies and Pranab fills the space in her life and gives her the companionship which her husband failed to provide her. Usha's mother has to spend her time waiting for her husband to return from the office without having any company. Her cultural bond brings her to feel desperate and lonely. Homesickness search for identity, and quest for social acquaintances which brought them together.

Usha's father does not allow her mother to enter into his world. As "He was wedded to his work, his research and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate" (65). He lacks mutual understanding and feeling of his wife. Alienation, isolation has become a curse for her boredom land. The routine life away from the homeland increased her boredom and made her so upset that she started finding emotional satisfaction on the immigrant Pranab, who visits their place almost every day. Usha's father is also glad about the visits of Pranab because he offered the companionship to his wife who missed her life in India. "My father was grateful to Pranab Kaku for the companionship he provided, freed from the sense of responsibility he must have felt for forcing her to leave India" (66) Boudi sticks to the Bengali

culture without adjusting to the American. She is like a bird trapped in a golden cage of culture and tradition.

Boudi recollects her memory of Indian marriage but there is no trace of it in Pranab's marriage. In India it's an affair so sacred, so pious that majority of them are invited, with a priest offering worship to the god to bestow upon the newly married couple. A large feast held and the couple is blessed by the guest too. Pranab has invited only thirty to thirty five people not very much like the Indian marriages. Boudi feels restless and keeps complaining about the formality of the proceedings and says "It would be the only Bengali aspect of the wedding, the rest of it would be strictly American, with a cake and a minister and Deborah in a long white dress and veil" At Pranab's wedding, Lahiri depicts cultural clashes between Bengali and American cultures.

Pranab Kaku could not share his past history, his social relationships, his emotions and feelings which he felt for his parents and other relatives with Deborah and this ghettoization ultimately collapsed his marriage, Pranab Kaku's resistance to reconcile and reciprocate his native culture with that of host culture at home, in his relationship and in his behavior are the main reason of the failure of his marriage. His marrying a Bengali woman after the divorce shows his long suppressed desire to reconnect to his with the ethnic community.

Thus the story deals with the various themes cultural clash, extra-marital affairs, isolation, generational rift, immigration and adjustment, rootlessness and other such things. Pranab fails to find his identity in the world where there is no sense of belongingness. Boudi portrays the trauma of cultural disorientation and displacement suffered by almost all the Indian immigrants. She suffers from cultural introspection and in return is terribly disturbed.

Jhumpa Lahiri Brings out a powerful depiction of problems of a interracial marriage, in *A Choice of Accommodations* through the characters of Amit and Megan. Hawthorne's epigram from "The Custom-House" on how children "strike their roots into unaccustomed

earth” gets applied to the story where Amit’s difficulty in establishing roots in between two cultures is examined. His sense of inadequacy in the interracial marriage and the subsequent restlessness and insecurity leads to lack of attachment in wedlock.

Amit feels totally lost in the difference between the family he has created and the one in which he has grown up. He has to find meaning in his relationship with his wife and children, getting rooted in the newly established dispensation. The accommodations they need to make in their relationship is indicative of Lahiri’s characters in search of identity in the unaccustomed earth.

The story is set in a old prep school, Langford Academy in Massachusetts, where the couple Amit and Megan spends weekend, becomes an opportunity for the duo to introspect on their individual identities and interpersonal relationship as spouse and parents. The relationship between Amit and his wife Megan survives because both of them make accommodations and adjustments in their life just as they choose the place where they stay for the weekend. Amit, a Bengali man married to an American woman Megan goes to attend the wedding of his prep school crush. Finds his wife secretly obsessing about the persisting psychic hold of childhood romance on her husband. This thought torments her and she cannot have a congenial and cordial relationship with her husband. Amit tells a complete stranger that their marriage has ‘disappeared’. Amit is always apprehensive of his divorce with Megan “a brief glance in the wrong direction, he knew could toss his existence over a cliff”(91). But later on Amit revealed the truth to Megan that Pam is only his friend not his love, which gave new life to Megan.

Amit’s parents vehemently opposed their marriage because she is an ordinary American girl. Though they are liberal people they expected Amit to tie the knot with the Bengali girl. But he married Megan without the wish of his parents. After marriage Amit is eager to have kids against the wish of Megan, finally they give birth to two daughter Maya and Monica, Which reveals their Indian identity despite their fully American appearance. Amit is bothered

by the appearance of his children because. Both Maya and Monica inherited Megan's coloring, without a trace of Amit's deeply tan skin and black eyes, so that apart from their vaguely Indian name they appeared fully American (94).

The racial and physical subjective are juxtaposed with the social and cultural identity of Amit. Thus the title 'A Choice of Accommodations' signifies Amit's experience of rootlessness having been estranged from his parents and confronting his marital life in fear and repudiation.

Only Goodness' deals with a sensitive portrait of an Indian family coping with addiction. Lahiri Portrays about a plucky caretaker sister tries to give her little brother the liberal American upbringing that their rigid Indian parents have no clue about it. The parents of Sudha move from India to London and to America, seeking greener pastures. Their children growing up in an alien land keep moving from place to place in pursuit of their education and careers. Their in between lives in diaspora, leave them to themselves to setup their own inter-racial families in the Unaccustomed Earth. In school Sudha and Rahul, are teased because of their colour and food."Her parent had always been blind to the things that plagued their children; being teased at school for the colour of their skin ... (143)"

This story is different from most of Lahiri's stories that have the themes of death and alienation. However the central theme of rooting and uprooting in Unaccustomed Earth runs in different manner in the story. The elder sister attempts to groom her brother Rahul in a better atmosphere of building intimacy, in the midst of their parents living in frigid marriage Sudha scrutinizes:"The perplexing fact of her parent's marriage. It was neither happy nor unhappy, and the lack of emotion in either extreme was what upset Sudha most.(137)

Sudha introduces her brother to alcohol which eventually betrays their relationship. Dropping out of school and estranged from family, he becomes a victim of substance abuse. His parents worried and the mother says "That's the problem with this country.... "Too many freedoms, too much having fun, when we were young, life isn't always about fun". (143) Her

attempt at reforming him become vain. Sudha has to take ultimately full of responsibility for having created a monster out of her brother by her misdirecting him and joining him in their drinking bouts. She goes onto find her own eminently, respectable, productive-citizen from of escape moving to London working as an economist and marrying a cautious bleached Englishman whose brittle boundaries support her goal.

She has a wrong sense of responsibility towards Rahul despite his drinking problem. She blundered in depositing her trust in him and hiding the truth even from her husband. She risked inviting him to London to reform him. But her plans backfired. At last Sudha realises that her trusting her brother has been a mistake as he could never be transformed by her positive attitudes full of goodness.

The fictionist has very skillfully handled the theme of uprooting for a new beginning. Ruptured relationships are shown as signs of characters seeking self identity in the midst of trust and mistrust.

In 'Nobody's Business' Lahiri portrays the hopeless love of the Bengali woman has for a philandering Egyptian boy friend. It is a story of round-robin romantic distress told from the point of view of a shy American graduate student Paul, who is alone in the world after his older adoptive parents passed away. He gets a crush on his beautiful Indian housemate Sang, but she clings to her affair with a preening philanderer, Farouk.

The story surrounds Sangeetha, known as Sang, a pretty Bengali girl of about thirty years to whom many Indian suitors desperately called to propose. Many of the suitors are confused about her studies and presumed she is getting her doctorate at Harvard, but in reality she is dropped out of Harvard and is working in a bookstore. When her roommates command about her suitors are romantic, sang refuses to accept their opinion and say they are not interested in her but in her community. "These men weren't really interested in her. They were interested in a mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful

Indian- community thinking in which she was an aging, overlooked poster child for years of barat natyam classes, perfect SATS.(176).

It is a great surprise for her roommates' Heather and Paul, when they come to know that she has a boy friend Freddy Farok, who is a Egyptian. She continues her love with Farouk and remained a submissive woman. Even though Sang comes to know that Farouk has a relationship with Deirdre she refuses to believe. Sang never suspected that he is exploding her with his infatuation and romantic love. Later she came to know from Deirdre, that he is a perfect dissembler and sex maniac having no friends but only lovers to satisfy his carnal desires.

She wants to be called as Sang because she does not want to reveal her Indian identity. Her friends suspected her to be a Japanese woman. But they come to know that her official name from her check that it is Sangeetha Biswas." What sort of name Sang was, half expecting a Japanese woman. It wasn't until she wrote out a check for her security deposit at the end of her visit that he saw that her official name was Sangeetha Biswas" (177)

Her roommate Paul never heard Sang speaking Bengali. To utter surprise he hears Sang using a Bengali word when she heard her sister has a baby boy and says to him," I am going to be called sang Mashi, "she told him excitedly, explaining that Mashi was the Bengali word for, "Aunt" 191

She leaves to London to see her sister and settles their, leaving behind her relationship with Farouk to live a free life. Thus Lahiri Portrays the life of the Protagonist Sang in the midst of interracial relationships.

The final trilogy of stories in the collection examines the emotional tangles of Hema and Kaushik examining, the histories of the duo belonging to two Bengali immigrant families in America.

Lahiri presents two contradictory attitudes of diasporic people in *Once in a Life Time*. One is of traditional diaspora, migrants who are still nostalgic of their country and cherishes memories of their homeland and wants to preserve them. The others, though they are also Bengali migrants, transplant and relocate themselves in a foreign land.

This story is narrated by the six-year old Hema who gushes about the rich sophisticated guests visiting them. Hema comes to know Kaushik from 1974 when she is six and he is nine years old. His parents decided to leave Cambridge and return to India abandoning their struggle in diaspora, unlike Hema's parents and other Bengalis. They come back again to the foreign land as Mrs. Choudhari suffering from cancer wants to die at some remote place far from parents and dear ones. Both the families develop intimacy because of their common origin and they talked about their lives left behind in Calcutta." In Calcutta they would probably have had little occasion to meet. Your mother went to a convent school and was the daughter of one of Calcutta's most prominent lawyers, a pipe-smoking Anglophile and a member of the Saturday club(225)

Hema's parents followed Indian tradition though they are living in America. Hema's mother doesn't allow Hema to sleep alone because she thinks that the American culture is a cruel one. "My mother considered the idea of a child sleeping alone a cruel American practice and therefore did not encourage it, even when we had the space" (229)

Hema as the teenage girl, shows her appreciation for Kaushik's parents for their open-mindedness, broad outlook and lavish life style. Through out the story she makes a comparison between two diasporic Indian families and their attitude.

Lahiri depicts emotional turmoil and uprootedness in *Years End*. Kaushik cannot get reconciled with the reality of his father's second marriage after the traumatic loss. The story depicts how Kaushik who is born and brought up in America fails in adjusting with his

father's new family as he could not tolerate some other woman who is far inferior to her mother in education and other sophistications fulfilling her place.

It is Kaushik who takes up the narration and tells about his uprootedness in the foreign land. Kaushik is utterly shocked when he gets a phone call from his father telling of his safe return to Massachusetts from Calcutta with a new stepmother and two stepsisters Rupa and Piu. That day when his father called him he is in his bed with his girl friend Jessica, which shows his free life is diaspora. He returned home to meet his father's new family, where he finds the two shy young girls who introduced themselves in a broken English. During the course of the conversation the kids spoke of their premonitions of difficult times at school due to poor language skills. Kaushik reassures them that the adjustment problems will be overcome in course of time as he himself faced after returning to U.S. at sixteen. "They spoke to me in English, their accents and their intonation sounding as severe as mine must have sounded to your fully American car when we arrived as refugees in your family's home. I knew the accents would soon diminish and then disappear (263).

When he finds the two girls looking at his mother's photograph in a shoebox Kaushik gets angry and leaves the house. He did not want to allow anyone to encroach on the space his mother occupied. So he buries all the pictures, snaps and whatever is associated with her mother's memories underground faraway near some Canadian beach and makes a move forward to 'explore new roads' anxiety is symbolically presented through the awe-inspiring landscape. He is consumed by the frigid and frightening landscape which exposed his guilt and fear. "No one in the world knew where I was, no one had the ability to reach me. It was like being dead, my escape allowing me to taste tremendous power by mother possessed forever. (290)

This is the painful moment for Kaushik's preparedness for a global citizen. Kaushik is an emotionally broken person, estranged from his father and his stepmother and her daughters.

The consequent rootless life urges him to go globe trotting and escape into a world of photojournalism.

Lahiri portrays the lack of love, familial and cultural relationships in *Going Ashore*. Hema and Kaushik's unhappy love affair and final option for an arranged marriage with Navin focuses the frustration and obsession in diasporic life. Lahiri becomes an omniscient narrator bringing together Kaushik and Hema in Rome after about two decades of separation from each other. Hema and Kaushik turn for a while in their adulthood into two quite different kinds of wanderer. Their ambitions run high to give narrative shape to rootlessness. Hema and Kaushik are "Glocalize" Citizens, comfortable in every corner of the world. They can relate to host country's culture as well as their native Culture.

Hema, a Latin Professor at Wellesley comes to Rome. Neither her parents, nor her would be-husband Navin, know what she is doing in Rome. She merely called it a Visiting lectureship at the institute of classical studies. She researched on Lucretius and is soaked in Latin literature, focusing only on her research, she is trying to escape her own loneliness in Rome. Being an introvert she never openly shared her life with anyone. "She has denied herself the pleasure of openly sharing life with the person she loved, denied herself even the possibility of thinking about children," (301). Hema could never go deeply into any sort of relationship with people as something obstructed it. Lahiri deftly comments on her inner Conflicts: "Now she was free of both of them, free of her past and free of her future... She was alone with her work, alone abroad for the first time in her life, aware that her solitary existence was about to end (298)|.

In Rome Kaushik gets a chance to meet Hema who remembers their living together when she is thirteen and how she nurtured her longing for him. He takes her to his apartment, where they spent the night of passionate intimacy between them. All through her life Hema wears old bangle in memory of her grandmother. The bangles which is a symbol of traditional

and cultural links with her family and others. With whom she has established relationship but Kaushik has symbolically hooked on to it to pull her into his life. But she has other plans and has to leave the past behind to begin a new .Though bangle will be replaced tenfold at her wedding “... She left she had left a piece of her body behind. She had grown up hearing from her mother that losing gold was inauspicious”(324)

Kaushik is a photojournalist who travels around the world but for him unaccustomed earth, the place where he feels most like an outsider, is his own home in Massachusetts, where his father’s new family has supplanted memories of his late mother. He is a hybrid human being in a hybrid country.

Thus Jhumpa Lahiri discusses the evolution and various stages of Diaspora. She has captured the agony of people trying to survive in a situation of having lost familial and cultural relationship due to circumstances in migrant existence.

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